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PROLEGOMENA TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY.

IV.

THE CONCEPT OF THE SOCIAL MIND.

It must be admitted that the concept of a social mind does not appeal to the "plain man." If the "plain man's" judgment were our criterion of science, social psychology, along with the theory of a luminiferous ether in physics and many other notable theories, would have to be consigned to the limbo of speculative fancies of over-erudite philosophers. There are others to whom, while not "plain-minded," the idea of a social mind will seem scarcely less absurd, either on account of some habit of thought or on account of a philosophic bias. Those who have been in the habit of associating with the word "mind" all that is usually implied in the English word "soul" will naturally be horrified on being told that societies have "minds." Again, a thorough-going individualist, fortified with a monadistic, Leibnizian metaphysic, is hardly to be expected to find proof for the existence of socio-psychical processes in the facts of societary life; for, according to his philosophic bias, are not individuals original and indestructible entities "without windows in their souls"? However, the social psychologist would get along very well if he had only to struggle with these two types of the learned and with the "plain man." But there is a third type of the learned whom he may well despair of convincing. These are those persons who, while able to see details, are not able to see the wider facts which connect the details. They cannot see unity in multiplicity, the whole process lying back of the more visible portions, or, as the old adage puts it, "the woods for the trees." They are not to be blamed for this, for their defect is due to their mental constitution rather than to an acquired bias. But because certain minds cannot see the truth in the perceptions which social psychology is trying to enforce is no reason for rejecting them as mere fancies. This is especially true of the conception of a "social mind." The term is undoubtedly

an unhappy one in many ways, as it tends to express too much, but a better one has unfortunately not yet been found. Let us see in the light of our past reasoning what content it can be given, and what the probable facts are which it is meant to cover.

The old-time individualist, as we have already hinted, has an easy way of disposing of the concept of the social mind. According to him, every man stands, as it were, upon a pedestal of his own. The individual is isolated, is unconnected with his fellows, save in a mechanical way. Even communication is regarded, either as quite inexplicable, or as a sort of semi-mechanical process by which ideas are converted into signs and transferred in some mysterious way from one mind to another. The psychical life of the individual is left by individualism, in a word, far more an unconnected fact than his physiological life. To anyone with such a bias the concept of a social mind, whatever content it be given, must appear as nonsense. But philosophical individualism, even in its modified forms, is as much an anachronism in the light of modern science, especially modern anthropology and ethnology, as the theory of special creation is in biology. Not only the form, but also largely the content of the psychical life of the individual has been shown to be due to his membership in his group, to the fact that he is a functioning element in a larger functional whole. The special creationist and the individualist may each persist in his theory, but neither can longer influence the tide of thought.

At the opposite extreme from individualism we find a theory equally unjustified by the facts. This is a curious mixture of mysticism and the mediæval logical realism, according to which the social mind is an entity distinct from and above the minds of individuals. Like the "soul" of mediæval philosophy the social mind is conceived of as a mysterious entity, which has a life of its own, independent of individual lives, yet in some way ruling or overruling the latter. Whether anyone ever seriously held such a theory in recent times may be doubted, but it is practically the theory which has been imputed to many of the pioneers in the field of social psychology. The mere statement of the theory is sufficient to indicate its absurdity, and likewise

the absurdity of assigning to the term "social mind" such a content as it would imply.

Between these two extreme views lie a number of theories which may be considered either as modifications of the one or the other, or as representing independent points of view. We shall notice but two of these, though they are characteristic. The first is Professor Giddings' theory of the social mind. Professor Giddings identifies the social mind with "the simultaneous like action of the minds of like socii."¹ He says: "To the group of facts that may be described as the simultaneous like mental-activity of two or more individuals in communication with one another, or as a concert of the emotion, thought, and will of two or more communicating individuals, we give the name social mind. This name, accordingly, should be regarded as meaning just this group of facts and nothing more."² Again: "*In its simplest form*, the social mind is nothing more or less than the simultaneous like responsiveness of like minds to the same stimulus."³ The social mind, then, according to Professor Giddings, reduces itself to the "like responsiveness of like minds to the same stimulus." There is no reference to a psychical process interrelating individual psychical processes; there is even no reference to a common life-process. Men might as well be so many radiometers exposed to the stimulus of the sun's rays. They would still exhibit the phenomena of the social mind in its simplest form, according to Professor Giddings' definition. The conception is mechanical, it is unorganic; it is, in fact, individualistic in a high degree. The individual is here still conceived as the independent entity which individualism has always asserted him to be. This is probably not due to Professor Giddings' individualistic bias, but rather to the individualistic and mechanical character of the psychology which he has adopted, and which colors all his thought quite as much as his theory of the social mind.⁴ In common with the psychologists from whom he

¹ *Elements of Sociology*, p. 121.

² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁴ In his earlier work (*Principles of Sociology*) and in places in the work from which we have quoted, it is fair to say, there are implications that the social mind is something more than "like responsiveness of like minds to the same stimulus;" but these are not carried out, and the general impression of his readers is as we have stated it.

borrowed his psychology he has committed the fallacy of mistaking the results of a process for the process itself. Professor Giddings' attempt to fix the content of the term "social mind," then, we cannot accept as satisfactory, for it is not based upon an organic view of the psychical life of society, and, indeed, it makes a social psychology logically impossible.

The other theory of the social mind which we wish to notice is that represented by Tarde, Le Bon, and to some degree by Professor Baldwin. They make the essence of the social mind to consist in the processes of suggestion and imitation. We cannot go into an elaborate criticism of this theory here, but must reserve such for a later article. It is sufficient to point out that this theory is also a diluted form of individualism, making men copying machines of one another, as it were, by leaving out of account the reference of suggestion and imitation to a common life-process. It is true that these writers have pointed out a part of the actual socio-psychical process, but they have mistaken this part for the whole. By disregarding the connection of the processes of suggestion and imitation with the common life-process, that is, by disregarding the organic aspect of the societary life, they have left the social process quite unconnected with anything else in the universe, making it seem an arbitrary and almost artificial affair; at the same time they have set the individual upon his old pedestal as the entity from which all things in society proceed. Professor Baldwin has in part perceived these errors. He has perceived the mechanical character of imitation when at its purest, and the lack of a principle of organization in the mere imitative process.¹ More important still, he has perceived that social suggestion is a development in social life. He says: "Social suggestibility could not be the original form of man's [social] life, for then there would be an absolute gulf between him and the animal world, in which instinctive equipment in definite directions is supreme."² But Professor Baldwin does not dwell upon these perceptions, and his theory of the social process is in form, at least, almost as individualistic as

¹ *Social and Ethical Interpretations of Mental Development*, p. 479.

² *Ibid.*, p. 237.

Tarde's. He makes imitation the sole method of that process, although the two passages to which we have just referred argue directly, it seems to us, against so doing. If there is any validity at all, however, in Professor Baldwin's criticisms of Tarde's sociology, one is certainly justified in rejecting as unsatisfactory a definition of the social mind purely in terms of imitation and suggestion.

If the positions taken in criticising the above theories are sound, it is evident that the social mind must be correlated with the societary life-process. The social mind is the psychical process which mediates the new adjustments in the group life-process. It is a *social* process, because it mediates the adjustments of a functional unity which is made up of individuals. The "social mind" is, in brief, a convenient term for the socio-psychical process. Just as in the most recent individual psychology the term "mind" has come to mean, not an entity, but a process, so in social psychology the term "social mind" must mean, not a societary "soul," but a societary process. In both cases the term expresses the unity of the process—the fact that the many visible psychic processes are aspects of but a single unified process. But the individual mind, as we have already pointed out, is highly unified, not only functionally, but structurally; while the unity expressed by the term "social mind" is only a low order of functional unity. This distinction is important; but while it may render the term "social mind" in a certain sense inappropriate, it does not make the fact expressed by the term any the less real. The social mind, then, is an expression of the fact that society is an organic functional unity. The unity of socio-psychical processes which it implies corresponds to the unity of organic processes within the social group. Without the organic unity of society there could be no social mind in any intelligible sense of the term; for a basis for unity of development in the socio-psychical process would be entirely lacking. Moreover, the unity of the socio-psychical process is secured far more through habit and instinct than through suggestion and imitation. Indeed, the latter are but special forms of the former. Now, habit and instinct manifestly presuppose physiological organization, physiological continuity and unity. In

the case of society, therefore, as in that of the individual, there is no psychological organization without biological organization—a truth which has already been pointed out, and which ought hardly to need emphasis in this age of biological science. The social mind, then, is to be conceived as the psychical side of the societary life-process; and its functioning and development have strict reference to the biological side of that process.

The relation which the social mind bears to individual minds, and, in general, the relation which socio-psychical processes bear to individual psychical processes, may be illustrated by the analogy of the organism. The relation is qualitatively exactly that which obtains between cellular processes and the processes of the organism as a whole. In the same sense in which it is right to speak of general organic processes as over and above cellular processes, it is right to speak of socio-psychical processes as over and above individual psychical processes. But in both cases it is probably better to speak of the wider process as immanent in the narrower. If from one point of view the activities of the organism appear only as the activities of its cells, from another point of view the activities of the cells appear only as elements in the activity of the organism. The two points of view are evidently the two aspects of a single reality and cannot be opposed to each other. The case is exactly the same with socio-psychical and individual psychical processes. The socio-psychical processes are simply the individual psychical processes under the aspect of the larger functional whole in whose psychical activity they appear as elements. The social mind, then, is immanent in the individual mind, and both are aspects of a single reality.

We are now prepared to examine the meaning of the phrase “social consciousness.” In the widest sense of the term, it is evident that all consciousness is, from one point of view, “social consciousness.” If what has been said concerning the relation of the social to the individual mind is true, there is no consciousness that is not social consciousness in one of its aspects. However, there is a narrower use of the term which is quite justifiable. At a certain stage of social and mental development the members

of a social group become conscious of their solidarity as a group. This "group-consciousness," like the consciousness of the individual, manifests itself only when there is an interruption in group-habits—only when it is necessary for the group as a whole to make some new adjustment. This consciousness or feeling of identity on the part of the members of a group may be regarded as the social consciousness *par excellence*, as it is that part of the consciousness of the individual which is particularly concerned in the functioning of the group under difficulty, that is, when some problem confronts the group as a whole. Or, if we choose to consider all consciousness as social consciousness, as we undoubtedly may do from one point of view, then consciousness of social solidarity, of group unity, may be regarded as a sort of social self-consciousness. Such social self-consciousness, like the self-consciousness of the individual, tends to become more continuous and more vivid as the process of development advances, since the nature of that process is to increase the complexity of life-conditions, and thereby the number of problems requiring new adjustments to be made. In a word, it shows the same laws of function and development as individual consciousness in general. This is the "social consciousness" which is referred to by most writers on social psychology; and as it is peculiarly the expression of the socio-psychical process, it may justly be regarded as entitled to the name, although its position in the socio-psychical process, as well as its relation to the individual psychical process, must not be forgotten. Manifestly there is no sense other than the two mentioned in which the term "social consciousness" can be used with reference to reality. The socio-psychical process is not highly unified both structurally and functionally, like the psychical processes of the individual, and so does not form a single unified consciousness, a single center of experience, like the individual mind.

There is no social consciousness, then, which is apart from or more than individual consciousness. The individual, not the social group, is, and from the very nature of the process of development must always remain, the center of experience. These propositions are so self-evident that it seems almost absurd even

to state them. Yet many of the decriers of social psychology have made social psychologists guilty of saying the very opposite. Neither do these propositions affect in any way the truth of the propositions previously advanced concerning the nature of the social mind and social consciousness. What social psychology stands for—and accordingly also the concepts “social mind” and “social consciousness”—is the perception that a single process may go on through several “centers of experience.” The admission of this truth is the admission of all that the terms “social mind” and “social consciousness” essentially imply. Of the three possible meanings of the phrase “social consciousness,” then, the two first mentioned are alone legitimate from the standpoint of reality. The first is perhaps in strictest accord with the definition given of the social mind, while the second has the advantage of both popular and scientific usage, and of standing for a peculiar manifestation of the societary life.

The concept of the social mind, then, is not meaningless, although it does not mean that society presents a unified consciousness, much less that it is ruled over by a mysterious entity resembling the “soul” of theology and metaphysics. The content to be given to the concept is, as we have seen, that of a process which unites the processes of many minds into a functional whole, and which mediates the activities of the group as a whole. It is to be regarded as an expression of the common organic life-process of the group, of the fact that the group constitutes an organic functional unity, not as something imposed upon, or separate from, the life-process. The social mind is a convenient name, therefore, for the psychical side of the societary life-process considered in its unity, and is a well-nigh indispensable term in social psychology for referring to the unity which must be thought of as the subject of psychical changes in the societary life. With this conception of the social mind the meaning of such terms as “social consciousness,” the “popular will,” the “*Zeitgeist*,” “public opinion,” etc., becomes clear, while social psychology is freed from any taint of mysticism and becomes as positivistic in its spirit as modern individual psychology.